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THE COURT, THE NOBILITY AND THE MONARCH'S RESPONSIBILITIES IN SHAKESPEARE'S ELIZABETHAN HISTORY PLAYS

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Abstract

After 1588, several socio-political and economic problems appeared in the Elizabethan society. These problems were aggravated by Elizabeth I's desire to live royally without responsibility. The correlation between good government and the responsibility of monarchs was emphasised in the literature of the period, as well. Particularly, the depiction of capable and incapable monarchs on the stage and in printed versions of plays made that correlation very topical. For instance, Shakespeare's Elizabethan history plays depicted monarchs like Henry VI, Richard II or Henry IV who disused or misused their powers and created socio-political problems. The depiction of a possibly good government was depicted through Shakespeare's Henry V. Henry V's definition of responsibilities provided solutions for the failings of the system. The depictions of these fictive monarchs, on the other hand, might have been read by the contemporary Elizabethan audiences in relation with their own problems. Thus, this article will analyse to what extent Shakespeare's Elizabethan history plays reflected contemporary issues about the responsibility of monarchs.

Keywords: Elizabethan Period, Shakespeare, History Plays, Responsibility of Monarchs.

1. Introduction

Following 1588, the Elizabethan society faced several socio-political crises that were rooted in economic problems. The failure of crops, periodic epidemics, high inflation, uprisings, and conflict with Spain in Flanders and Ireland drained the royal treasury (Williams, 1995: 160-228, 357-360; Guy, 2001: 316-317; Deiter, 2008: 13-25, 79-96; Kermode, 2009: 77; Beer, 2005: 9; Hammer, 1999: 354-355; Manning, 1988: 55-57; Doran, 1994: 69-70; Black, 1959: 408-410). Amid such problems, Elizabeth I followed rather an escapist method and tried to ignore these problems. Accordingly, Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603) wanted to live royally without responsibility. Rather than step by step overseeing state finances herself, she entrusted William Cecil and later Robert Cecil with the distribution of the economic resources (Loades, 1992: 165; Hammer, 1999: 114). What is more, as a result of her growing age, Elizabeth I more and more detached herself from socio-political and economic problems (Montrose, 1996: 62; Montrose, 2006: 244; James, 1986: 443-444; Loades, 1997: 109; Perry, 2006: 18-19; Haigh, 1988: 86-92; Weir, 1998: 257; Dickinson, 2013: 97). The paradox of a monarch's desire to be devoid of responsibilities was also reflected in Shakespeare's history plays.¹ The theatrical depictions of monarchs like Shakespeare's Henry VI, Richard II or Henry IV who were incapable of running the state properly were reflective of off-stage association of Elizabeth I's desire to be a monarch without responsibilities. The depiction of a possibly good government was portrayed through Shakespeare's Henry V as his definition of responsibilities provided solutions for the failings of the system. Therefore, this article will analyse to what extent Shakespeare's Elizabethan history plays reflected contemporary issues about the responsibility of monarchs.

2. Responsibilities of Monarchs

In line with Prior's reading of Figgis, it cannot be argued that the term "divine right of kings" can be applied before the 17th century (Prior, 1973: 139). Yet, the divine ordination of the monarch was the backbone of Medieval and Early Modern political structure (Collingwood, 1956: 53-55; Tillyard, 1946: 9, 24; Kastan, 2001: 167). Accordingly, God as the king of kings appointed the monarch as His representative on earth (Riehl, 2010: 93; Collingwood, 1956: 53; Agamben, 1998: 15; Spiekerman, 2001: 7-8). Yet, while the monarch was divinely ordained, which gave the monarch his/her power, it gave him/her also the burden of

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¹ This article is the revised and expanded version of an extract from a part of the first chapter of my unpublished PhD dissertation entitled "Shakespeare's Satirical Representation of the Elizabethan Court and the Nobility in His English History Plays" (Hacettepe University, 2016). Throughout the article, Shakespeare's history plays will be abbreviated in parenthetical references as follows: *Henry VI Part 1* (1HVI), *Henry VI Part 2* (2HVI), *Henry VI Part 3* (3HVI), *Richard II* (RII), *Henry IV Part 1* (1HIV), *Henry IV Part 2* (2HIV), and *Henry V* (HV).

responsibilities. For instance, in the dedicatory epistle to *A Myrroor for Magistrates*, first published in 1559, Baldwin focused on the issue of responsibility:

For as Justice is the chiefe vertue, so is the miniftracion therof the chiefest office: & therefore hath God established it with the chiefest name, honoring & calling kinges, & al officers vnder the[m] by his owne name: Gods. Ye be al Gods, as manye as have in your charge any miniftracion of Justice: What a [foul] shame were it, for any nowe to take vpon the[m] the name & office of God, and in [their] doynegs [show] them felves devils. (Baldwin, 1563: C3^r)

Thus, there was a correlation between status and responsibilities. As a result, a monarch who had the highest status in society had also the greatest responsibility in its administration.

However, as the epistle reflected, there was always the possibility of personal misuse. This possibility manifested itself in the weakening power of the monarch especially through his/her disregard towards his/her responsibilities of just administration. The Early Modern understanding of the English monarchy was based on a bilateral vertical relationship of give and take between the monarch and his/her subjects. The monarch expected loyalty from his/her subjects, and in exchange for their service s/he rewarded them, or their followers, with offices, titles or privileges (Williams, 1995: 398; Stone, 1979: 402-425; MacCaffrey, 1961: 101-121; Elton, 1991: 462). Yet, the relationship between the monarch and the subject could erode if the monarch acted in a self-centric way or refrained from being actively involved in administration. Hence, there was a tension between what theory preached and practice spoke about the responsibilities of a monarch.

3. Shakespeare's Henry VI: Disuse of Monarchical Responsibilities

In his history plays, William Shakespeare made use of chronicles, like Hall and Holinshed, and didactic literature, like Baldwin's *Myrroor for Magistrates* (Bullough, 1977: 1-15), and created several characters that reflected the tension between the theory and practice of kingship and administration. Shakespeare's Henry VI, for example, was a character through whom Elizabethan playgoers and reading audiences perceived a monarch who wanted to be discharged of responsibilities and have a simple life. Following the successful rule of Henry V, Henry VI's rule was marked by domestic turmoil that led into the infamous Wars of the Roses (Morgan, 1987: 36-40; Keen, 2003: 281; Griffiths, 2001: 234; Haigh, 1997: 3). The pseudo-historic depiction of these in Shakespeare's first tetralogy emphasised Henry VI's reluctance to maintain a political balance to ease the polarisation of the country into powerful groups. Especially in the first three plays of the tetralogy, the Court was first divided between Protector Gloucester and Cardinal Winchester (*1HVI* 1.3.33-68, 3.1.1-44, 4.1.188-194, 5.1.28-33; *2HVI* 3.1.4-30). Then the Court was divided between the Yorkists and the followers of Suffolk and Somerset (*1HVI* 2.4.25-33; *2HVI* 3.2.283-297). In all phases, however, Henry VI could not manage the conflict among his nobility.

The burden of the monarch's responsibilities was too much for the incapable Henry VI. Aware of this fact, Shakespeare's Henry VI fantasised about a simpler life devoid of such a burden:

KING HENRY [VI]. [...]
Would I were dead! if God's good will were so.
For what is in this world but grief and woe?
O God! Methinks it were a happy life
To be no better than a homely swain,
To sit upon a hill, as I do now,
To carve out dials quaintly, point by point,
Thereby to see the minutes how they run,
How many make the hour full complete,
How many hours bring about the day,
How many days will finish up the year,
How many years a mortal man may live.
When this is known, then to divide the times:
So many hours must I tend my flock,
So many hours must I take my rest,
So many hours must I contemplate,
So many hours must I sport myself,
So many days my ewes have been with young,
So many weeks ere the poor fools will ean,

So many years ere I shall shear the fleece,
 So minutes, hours, days, months, and years,
 Passed over to the end they were created,
 Would bring white hairs unto a quiet grave.
 Ah! What a life were this, how sweet, how lovely!
 Gives not the hawthorn-bush a sweeter shade
 To shepherds looking on their silly sheep,
 Than doth a rich embroidered canopy
 To kings that fear their subjects' treachery?
 O yes, it doth, a thousandfold it doth.
 And to conclude, the shepherd's homely curds,
 His cold thin drink out of his leather bottle,
 His wonted sleep under a fresh tree's shade,
 All which secure and sweetly he enjoys,
 Is far beyond a prince's delicates;
 His viands sparkling in a golden cup,
 His body couched in a curious bed,
 When care, mistrust and treason waits on him. (3HVI 2.5.19-54)

The pastoral imagery Henry VI employed was in compliance with his escapism from socio-political matters so far and was, therefore, not a new condition. The monarch had a central position and had to look after his "flock" of subjects. It may be true that to be the ruler of the nobility was like a curse, because of the many responsibilities attached to it. Yet, escaping from these responsibilities generated further problems which could not be solved with the transformation of the body natural into another profession. In particular, those responsibilities were linked to the body politic and could continue no matter in what condition the monarch would like himself to be. Hence, only the surface structure of kingship without powers and responsibilities was substituted by the shepherd who similarly had no regal responsibilities. Real-life seclusion from problems and fantasised pastoral exclusionism could be interchanged with each other. Thus, the deep structure of escaping responsibilities in the plot of the play was valid for both forms so that there was almost no change in the characterisation of Shakespeare's Henry VI, the passive king who discharged himself from all political responsibility.

4. Shakespeare's Richard II: Misuse of Monarchical Responsibilities

Similarly, among many characters shaped by Shakespeare, especially his Richard II was also reflective of Baldwin's epistle regarding the disuse or misuse of responsibilities. Primarily the product of Hall's and Holinshed chronicles (Holinshed, 1587: 493-498; Hall, 1548: A2^r-A4^r), the rule of Shakespeare's Richard II was marked by administrative failings that were the result of his arbitrary decisions. Basically, Richard II "ignored" law and "offended" his subjects by acting in an irresponsible way (Loades, 1974: 11). The play started with Richard II's implicit references about his ambiguous relationship with the murder of his uncle Woodstock, and the unfair banishment of his popular nephew Bolingbroke (*RII* 1.1.1-205, 1.3.118). Continuing with the promotion of his favourites in expense of the nobility and the commoners who were forced to pay heavy taxes (*RII* 1.4.42-64, 2.1.195-199), Shakespeare's Richard II was presented as a self-centric monarch devoid of any sense of responsibility.

Nevertheless, the most problematic part of Richard II's rule was that he did not acknowledge his failures and rather tried to protect himself with his birth-rights regarding his kingship. When, for instance, Richard II visited his uncle John of Gaunt in his deathbed, his uncle publicly scolded him for escaping from his royal responsibilities:

GAUNT. [...] Why, cousin, wert thou regent of the world,
 It were a shame to let this land by lease;
 But for thy world enjoying but this land,
 Is it not more than shame to shame it so?
 Landlord of England art thou now, not king.
 Thy state of law is bondsman to the law[.] (*RII* 2.1.109-114)

Richard II cut his uncle's words short, yet his subsequent reply that emphasised his "right royal majesty" only highlighted his failings:

KING RICHARD [II]. A lunatic lean-witted fool,
 Presuming on an ague's privilege!
 Darest with thy frozen admonition
 Make pale our cheek, chasing the royal blood
 With fury from his native residence?
 Now, by my seat's right royal majesty,
 Wert thou not brother to great Edward's son,
 This tongue that runs so roundly in thy head
 Should run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders! (*RII* 2.1.115-123)

If we consider his unjust judicial and economic decisions, Richard II's emphasis on his divine ordination and the rights associated with it was very ironic. Richard II's confidence in the divine right of the kings proved to be his weakness and deluded him into not seeing that to be king was not primarily based on lineage but also on responsibilities and the good management of the country. As Prior maintained,

Richard II is the only one of the kings dealt with in Shakespeare's histories who is a king by virtue of natural inheritance in a line established by a long uninterrupted tradition of rule by lineal descent, and whose legitimacy is acknowledged by everyone; he is also neither statesmanlike nor much interested in the serious problems of rule, and he uses power self-indulgently. He is therefore the ideal protagonist in an action which represents the Lord's anointed as unworthy of this awesome title. In making Richard an advocate of divine right, and to a degree not stressed by his sources, Shakespeare sets the conflicts and dilemmas of the play in their most acute form. What can loyal, honorable, and mighty subjects do when the power of the state is vested unquestionably, and sacramentally, in one who seems irresponsible and unjust in its exercise? [...] Richard's conviction that the powers and privileges which kingship carries are beyond question his to use is a source of his weakness. The possession of royalty so long taken for granted as an inherited authority has dulled the king's sense of the personal qualifications and the political demands of the office, and nothing remains except an appreciation of the traditional forms and ceremonies which mark its public exercise and the sense of personal power which is the most conspicuous prerogative of kingship. Inheriting the glory and power of the office without any serious pressure on him to make prudent use of the instruments of royal power – councils, courts of law, responsible delegation of authority, military support – Richard has come to rely chiefly on the idea of the king as divinely ordained and supported. (Prior, 1973: 141-143)

The fact that there were several productions of plays about Richard II between 1600 and 1601 to propagate anti-Elizabethan sentiments (Montrose, 1996: 68-71; Harrison, 1974: 194), the equation of Richard II and Elizabeth I might have been reflective of the consequences of Elizabeth I's administrative irresponsibility of the passive observance of political crises. Therefore, the production and later publication of Shakespeare's *Richard II* must have had impact on the perception of the topical issue regarding the responsibilities of the monarch.

5. Shakespeare's Henry IV and Henry V: The Burden of Responsibilities

Nevertheless, Shakespeare also depicted a king who was, at least, aware of the responsibilities of a monarch. Particularly, Shakespeare's Henry IV was depicted as a king who faced several problems in *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part 1* and *Henry IV Part 2*. His usurpation of the throne of the legitimate monarch Richard II with the aid of over-mighty subjects like the Percys resulted in several socio-political problems like civil war (*RII* 4.1.114-148; *1HIV* 1.3.237-254; *2HIV* 3.1.80-92). Henry IV's illegitimate take-over and the mismanagement of his relationship with his subjects placed a heavy burden on his shoulders, as he mused on his own:

How many thousands of my poorest subjects
 Are at this hour asleep! O sleep, O gentle sleep,
 Nature's soft nurse, how have I frightened thee,
 That thou no more will weigh my eyelids down,
 And steep my senses in forgetfulness?
 Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,
 Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,
 And hush'd with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,

Than in the perfum'd chambers of the great,
 Under the canopies of costly state,
 And lull'd with sound of sweetest melody?
 O thou dull god, why liest thou with the vile
 In loathsome beds, and leav'st the kingly couch
 A watch-case or a common 'larum-bell?
 Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast
 Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains
 In cradle of the rude imperious surge,
 And in the visitation of the winds,
 Who take the ruffian billows by the top,
 Curling their monstrous heads, and hanging them
 With deafing clamour in the slippery clouds,
 That with the hurly death itself awakes?
 Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose
 To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude,
 And in the calmest and most stillest night,
 With all appliances and means to boot,
 Deny it to a king? Then happy low, lie down!
 Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. (2HIV 3.1.4-31)

The simple lives of subjects were contrasted to the several time-consuming problems a monarch had to deal on behalf of those subjects. Yet, this comparison was not like Henry VI's escapist fantasy and rather acknowledged the realities of the duties and responsibilities of the monarch. Therefore, Henry IV's speech was descriptive of administrative duties, although the same Henry IV could not effectively fulfil those responsibilities, which led to domestic turmoil in the *Henry IV* plays.

Likewise, Shakespeare further dealt with the responsibilities of the monarch through his portrayal of Henry IV's son Henry V. Reformed from a (sham) prodigal son to an able monarch (1HIV 1.2.185-207; 2HIV 4.4.54-66, 5.5.48-102), the idealised figure of Henry V was used to foreground the burden of rulership. Shakespeare's Henry V showed that beneath the advantages of holding power were the simple joys a monarch could not enjoy. In a soliloquy he said the following:

We must bear all. O hard condition,
 Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath
 Of every fool whose sense no more can feel
 But his own wringing! What infinite heart's ease
 Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!
 And what have kings, that privates have not too,
 Save ceremony, save general ceremony?
 [...]

'Tis not the balm, the sceptre and the ball,
 The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
 The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,
 The farced title running 'fore the king,
 The throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp
 That beats upon the high shore of this world,
 No, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,
 Not all these, laid in bed majestical,
 Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
 Who with a body filled and vacant mind
 Gets him to rest, crammed with distressful bread;
 Never sees horrid night, the child of hell,
 But like a lackey from the rise to set
 Sweats in the eye of Phoebus and all night
 Sleeps in Elysium; next day after dawn
 Doth rise and help Hyperion to his horse,

And follows so the ever-running year
 With profitable labour, to his grave.
 And but for ceremony such a wretch,
 Winding up days with toil and nights with sleep,
 Had the fore-hand and vantage of a king.
 The slave, a member of the country's peace,
 Enjoys it, but in gross brain little wots
 What watch the king keeps to maintain the peace,
 Whose hours the peasant best advantages. (*HV* 4.1.230-281)

Building upon Henry IV's emphasis on the dissonance between sleep and administrative duty, Shakespeare's Henry V was in line with Baldwin's ideas and acknowledged that the monarchs were indeed "chiefest" in "vertue" because they bore the "chiefest office" (Baldwin, 1563: C3^r). Similar to his father's comparison between the king and the subject, Henry V's comparison emphasised to what extent the administration of the state obliged the monarch to renounce self-interest in favour of the general good of the public. Thus, it can be concluded that Shakespeare in his Elizabethan history plays portrayed kings who were either aware or unaware of the responsibilities of the monarch.

6. Shakespeare's Henry V: Reciprocity of the Burden of Responsibilities

However, apart from the burden of a monarch's obligations, Shakespeare also depicted that the reciprocal responsibilities of monarch and subject were necessary to create a well-functioning system. Accordingly, the monarch was not solely responsible for his/her own decisions but also for those of his/her subjects who followed those decisions:

BATES. Ay, or more than we should seek after; for we know enough, if we know we are the King's subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us.
 WILLIAMS. But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all 'We died at such a place', some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of anything, when blood is their argument? Now, if these men do not die well it will be a black matter for the King that led them to it, who to disobey were against all proportion of subjection. (*HV* 4.1.130-146)

The fact that subjects must follow the decisions of a monarch and be obedient to him/her created the double-burden on the monarch. Accordingly, a monarch should fear that his miscalculations might result in the ruin of his/her subjects. Yet, similarly, the obligations of a subject could not be taken as an excuse for misbehaviour. As Shakespeare's Henry V elucidated on the Elizabethan stage, the mishandlings or misfortune of the son, the servant, or the soldier could not wholly be laid onto the father, the master or the monarch without considering the time and space bound peculiarities that brought forth problems to one's lessers (*HV* 4.1.147-158):

[...] there is no king, be his cause never so spotless, if it come to the arbitrement of swords, can try it out with all unspotted soldiers. Some peradventure have on them the guilt of premeditated and contrived murder, some of beguiling virgins with the broken seals of perjury, some, making the wars their bulwark, that have before gored the gentle bosom of peace with pillage and robbery. Now if these men have defeated the law and outrun native

punishment, though they can outstrip men, they have no wings to fly from God. War is his beadle, war is his vengeance; so that here men are punished for before breach of the King's laws in now the King's quarrel: [...] Every subject's duty is the King's; but every subject's soul is his own. (*HV* 4.1.158-177)

Hence, any personal ill of the subject should not be attributed to the monarch without valid proofs. Thereby, it can be argued that the failings of the Elizabethan governance were both the failings of Elizabeth I and her subjects. Consequently, Shakespeare's Elizabethan history plays problematise contemporary questions regarding the responsibilities of monarchs through depicting monarchs who were both capable and were incapable of just administration.

7. Conclusion

Towards the end of her reign, Elizabeth I behaved like a weak monarch governed by her subjects as she wanted to live royally without bearing the necessary responsibilities attached to the state of rulership. Shakespeare's Elizabethan history plays reflected the tensions between the theory and practice of monarchical responsibilities. Respectively in the period between 1590 and 1599, the production of *1-3HV*, *RII*, *1-2HIV* and *HV* showed that the topic of the irresponsible monarch did not fade out from the consciousness of the Elizabethan playgoers. The subsequent quarto productions, on the other hand, were signs that the problems depicted in these plays were still topical for the Elizabethan reader who took interest in them. Therefore, it can be argued that Shakespeare's Elizabethan history plays provided a ground for the reflection of contemporary issues.

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